

Mars Hill University fundraising for \$28M campus center, other construction

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MARS HILL - Mars Hill University is under construction as the county's lone four-year college is in the midst of building a new campus center and a campus beautification project on its Lunsford Commons quad.

In a Facebook video Feb. 29, President Tony Floyd announced the campus's Together We Rise fundraising campaign to help the university meet its goal, which, according to university spokesperson Mike Thornhill, will cost \$28 million.

According to Thornhill, the \$28 million campus center will feature student activity space, a student fitness center, gaming, dining area and a welcoming space for the university's admissions office, Cothran Center for Career Readiness, chaplain's office, student life and student organizations.

According to the capital campaign website, Mars Hill University expects construction to be completed in fall 2025.

In a Feb. 29 video announcing the Together We Rise capital campaign, Floyd said a former Mars Hill University student has pledged to match every dollar contributed to the Together We Rise campus center campaign, up to a total of \$1 million.

The new campus center will renovate the existing Blackwell Hall building, as well as nearly double the footprint of that building. In order to accommodate the larger building, loading and unloading zones, and accessibility needs, as well as access to the construction site and staging, it is necessary that the Robinson Infirmary building be removed, according to the website.

According to the website, the university plans to store the rock from Robinson Infirmary and repurpose it in various ways throughout campus as needed.

The Together We Rise capital campaign has set an ambitious goal of raising \$20 million.

The university is encouraging community members, alumni and friends of the university to make a contribution to the campus center construction fund before March 31.

"Every donation, regardless of size, will be matched dollar-for-dollar, amplifying the impact of each supporter and pushing us over the finish line," Thornhill said in an email to The News-Record.

The Together We Rise website said it hopes to allow the university to "create a modern new space that will inspire moments of connection and reflection."

The new campus center will serve as the hub of the new student-centered vision for the campus, Floyd said.

"We have a lot of energy, we have a lot of excitement and a lot of improvements to invest in our future," Floyd said in the video. "The new campus center is going to be dynamic. We're going to have all the things that students and crave and need, in one area, where they'll be able to be comfortable, be able to be together, we'll be able to spend time with our faculty and be able to really grow as Mars Hill Lions.

"We want to grow, and we want to make our university even more dynamic."
Amphitheater space, other renovations

According to the Together We Rise website, part of the plan of the campus center is to open up the views of Bailey Mountain and open up the campus center building to green space and outdoor seating, as well as build out a portion of the Lower Quad into an amphitheater space with a stage for performances.

Local residents may have also noticed a new sign at the gazebo park downtown.

According to the Together We Rise capital campaign website, the university will be beautifying the lot, which will be named Trammell Family Park, and planting new trees and making it into an accessible space for all.

"We look forward to having an open public space that the entire Mars Hill community can continue to enjoy and make it accessible for all. We are hoping to introduce a new water feature on the lot and utilize an old mill stone that has been stored on our campus for many years."

The university plans to hold a ribbon cutting ceremony for its Sunken Garden and front sign in May.

According to Thornhill, the university will host a ribbon cutting ceremony for its new campus center March 22 at 2 p.m.

Johnny Casey has covered Madison County for The Citizen Times and The News-Record & Sentinel for three years. He earned a first-place award in beat news reporting in the 2023 North Carolina Press Association awards. He can be reached at 828-210-6074 or jcasey@citizentimes.com.